

Program Manager Interviews

DSMC's New Commandant — Navy Rear Adm. “Lenn” Vincent

From Hawaii to Northern Virginia —
A Tough Transition, and a Tough Job Ahead

After two-and-a-half years in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, as Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics, Fleet Supply and Ordnance, U.S. Pacific Fleet, Navy Rear Adm. “Lenn” Vincent was offered the position of Commandant, Defense Systems Management College (DSMC). The decision to leave his job, the Hawaiian Islands, and the Hawaiian people he loved for an assignment in Northern Virginia in the dead of winter, could not have been an easy one.

On Dec. 30, 1997, however, he became not only the College's 14th Commandant, but also the first Navy Supply Corps officer to hold the position of Commandant within a Defense Acquisition University (DAU) consortium school.

A tall, soft-spoken “Okie” from McAlester, whose grandmother was half Cherokee, Vincent is quick with a smile and handshake, and radiates a style of make-yourself-at-home, easygoing affability that makes him easy to talk to and interview.

Unlike most military officers within DoD who deliberately pursue a commission, Vincent had no grand design to build a career as a military officer (much less, as a military flag officer). His original plan was to finish college, serve his two-year obligation in the Navy as an enlisted man, and then pursue his career ambition to be a history teacher and coach.

Collie J. Johnson, Managing Editor, Program Manager Magazine, conducted the interview with Vincent on behalf of the DSMC Press.



VINCENT IS A CAREER ACQUISITION OFFICER WHO HONED HIS ACQUISITION SKILLS, FOR THE MOST PART, IN KEY CONTRACTING AND CONTRACT MANAGEMENT ASSIGNMENTS, INCLUDING COMMANDER OF THE DEFENSE CONTRACT MANAGEMENT COMMAND AND ASSISTANT COMMANDER FOR CONTRACTS, NAVAIR SYSTEMS COMMAND.

However, the casual advice offered by a “station keeper” to apply for Officer Candidate School versus merely serving his two-year obligation, changed his future in a way he could never have contemplated at the time.

Eventually, that advice took him from the small town of McAlester, Okla., to the select minority of Navy officers who ultimately attain the rank of Admiral.

A man who chooses his words carefully, Vincent is a career acquisition officer who honed his acquisition skills, for the

most part, in key contracting and contract management assignments, including Commander of the Defense Contract Management Command and Assistant Commander for Contracts, NAVAIR Systems Command.

He expresses optimism and enthusiasm for the future of the College and DAU, and is confident that DSMC will meet the challenges of acquisition reform.

In this interview, distance learning and continuing education surface as two of his major priorities — topics you will

undoubtedly read more about in future issues of *Program Manager*.

Program Manager: *Would you tell our readers a little of your background and the types of jobs and experiences that led to your selection as Commandant of DSMC.*

Vincent: I came in the Navy Reserve in 1961. I was facing the draft at the time, so I thought the Navy was probably the better choice. My original intent was to go into the Navy and do two years obligated service. As it turned out, I got married in the meantime and decided to finish college (I had completed two years of education before that). So, after getting a deferment from active duty, I did get a degree. As a matter of fact, my intent was to teach high school and coach football.

But I still had my obligation to do. So one of what we called “station keepers” (a member of the reserve unit in charge of administering records) actually really pushed me into trying to become an officer candidate versus going in as an enlisted man. “You know, you’re going to get a college degree. Don’t you think you ought to do this rather than do that?” Apparently, thank goodness, he must have seen something in me that prompted him to advise me to become an officer candidate.

He had a hard sell because I didn’t really want to do that. I wanted to just serve two years versus three years. But once he sat down and showed me the various benefits of staying an extra year, it didn’t take too much convincing.

I eventually agreed to take an officer battery test, which is the first thing you have to do. But I must say I was a reluctant player. I finally said, “Okay, I’ll take the test; you want me to do this, so I’ll do it.”

So I drove to Oklahoma City and took the test half-heartedly, and when I finished, I was sure that I didn’t pass it. I gave it to the lieutenant that administered it and said, “You know, I don’t think I did very well.”

He said, “Hey, go get a sandwich, come back, and we’ll have it graded.”

I did that, came back, and he said, “Hey, that’s good. Congratulations. Sign here and we’ll send you to Officer Candidate School.” That’s exactly the way it was.

So I went to Officer Candidate School thinking, “Well, if it’s too hard, I’ll just get out and do the two-year enlistment as I originally planned.” But when you get there, whatever it is inside you that won’t let you fail, makes you stay there. I didn’t like everything that was happening to me, but I wouldn’t quit.

When I got my commission in July of 1965, I went to the Navy Supply Course School in Athens, Ga., to get the basic supply corps education and training, still thinking that all I wanted was to do my three years, then get out and go into education.

And as a matter of fact, I did get out after my first tour, went back to my hometown, talked to various members of the school board — high school principal, superintendent — and had a contract offered me. But I let it set on a table for about a week before I declined their offer. Somehow, it really just didn’t feel right. I must have known in my heart that it wasn’t what I really wanted to do.

Program Manager: *Any regrets?*

Vincent: No, none. I did stay out of the Navy, though, for two years and worked at a couple of jobs in Tulsa, Okla. — one in industry and one in the securities business. Then I got a letter in the mail from the Navy Supply Corps asking if I would like to come back into the Navy. And at that period in my life, it hit me just right. As a result, I came back in — after being out for 27 months — and I’ve never regretted it since.

From that point on, my Navy career included many acquisition tours. I was selected to go to post-graduate school at The George Washington University where I received an MBA in procurement and contracting; from there I went to my first procurement job at the Naval

Supply Center, Puget Sound, as the contracts director. I’ve been in and out of the acquisition, procurement, and contracting business for many years now: from buying spare parts and services, to administering and negotiating shipbuilding and ship repair contracts; to buying spares for surface ships and submarines at the ICP in Mechanicsburg, Penn.

My career has also included buying for the Naval Aviation Systems Command — aviation weapons systems, airplanes, and avionics — to being the Commander, Defense Contract Administration Services Region in Los Angeles. I’ve also served as Commander, Defense Contract Management Command International, and as Commander, Defense Contract Management Command [DCMC], responsible for managing most of the DoD contracts. These latter joint assignments taught me just how important administering contracts that have already been awarded really is.

After my assignment at DCMC, the Navy sent me back into the operating forces of the Navy, specifically the Pacific Fleet. Because of the enormous size of the Pacific AOR — 100 million square miles and 13 time zones — the logistic challenges are daunting.

Putting it altogether, it has been quite an acquisition education.

As Yogi Berra put it, “When you come to a fork in the road...take it.” I guess meeting that station keeper at my Reserve unit was a fork in the road for me.

And I think, very frankly, in terms of coming up through the ranks over the course of my career, that’s happened an awful lot. Because I haven’t had any real grand design necessarily, whether it’s to be a Navy flag officer or an acquisition officer. I just enjoyed being a Navy officer, especially a Navy Supply Corps officer.

I’m a very grateful, fortunate guy, who has taken whatever comes, at whatever level I was at, and just tried to do my best.

Program Manager: What was your reaction when you received confirmation that you were going to be the next DSMC Commandant? Did you actively seek this assignment? Why?

Vincent: It was mixed on probably different levels. One is, I loved Hawaii. I loved being back in the Navy operating forces, and the kinds of challenges and breakthroughs we were making at CINCPAC Fleet in various areas of supply and logistics support. And of course, I loved the weather, the people I worked with, and the Hawaiian people. So, when you think about moving from there in the December-January time frame, it really was an environmental shock.

On the other hand, after two-and-a-half years there, I think that we were ready to come back to the continental United States. We had no aversion to coming back into the Washington arena and certainly no aversion to coming back into the acquisition area, where I believe I can contribute in some measure, to improve the overall acquisition process.

No, I had no idea of ever becoming Commandant of the Defense Systems Management College. But I must say it was an honor, particularly when you consider that I'm the first Navy Supply Corps officer to be offered an opportunity like this.

Program Manager: Many of our readers may remember a former DSMC Commandant also named Vincent, who was also an Admiral in the U.S. Navy. Did you know him?

Vincent: It's interesting that out of 14 DSMC Commandants, two were named Vincent and both were Navy Admirals. I did know Admiral [William] Vincent.¹ In fact, he served in the Brunswick, Maine, area while I was living in Brunswick but actually working at Bath, Maine, where I was assigned as the contracts officer for the Supervisor of Shipbuilding and the ship repair (SUPSHIP).

Then when he was the Commandant here [DSMC], I was the Commander, DCMC. Occasionally, I'd get his telephone calls

or mail would be misrouted. And he and I both came from NAVAIR [Naval Air Command] about that point in time — though I didn't know him well, I certainly met him at various venues and conferences.

Program Manager: Please tell us about your leadership style. In the short time you've been our Commandant, people describe you as candid and open to new ideas.

Vincent: I'm sure I have a leadership style. But I would be hard-pressed to categorize it. When I was doing my MBA courses and taking various management-type courses, I remember (I thought it was interesting then, and I see why he said this) one of my professors saying, "You will read all of these treatises on different management philosophies — but in the end, you will develop your own."

And I think he was right. Now, whether I've developed one that's a classic textbook style, I don't know. You, the staff, and faculty may ultimately be the best judge of that.

But you are right. I have believed and, for the most part, practiced openness — trying to get to know people that I'm working with and around, and just trying to create an environment that makes people want to come to work or school, as the case may be, and give it their best efforts. I don't want our students or staff to get up in the morning and dread coming here.

But if you create an atmosphere, in my opinion, that lets people do their jobs, gives them the right kinds of resources, tools, visibility, and recognition, as well as a sense that they're empowered and contributing to something important, then I believe we're really going down the right path. When done properly, it encourages teamwork and team growth.

I want the students, staff, and faculty to feel comfortable in discussing problems openly among themselves and with me. The challenge for me is not to engage in all the issues. I try to keep a balance and

know enough of what's going on to keep the organization on the right course.

We here at the College have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to be not only leaders, but also mentors. Where possible, I think mentorship is part of creating the right kind of an atmosphere for our students, staff, and faculty.

I will always challenge the "We've always done it this way" attitude. I will ask lots of questions. Some of them are going to be, perhaps hard to answer. But we must ensure that we're trying to make a good product even better. Because as we know, the budget is reducing and we're going to be considered part of that costly infrastructure that you hear about — that costly infrastructure that needs to be reduced to pay for the kind of force modernization that the DoD leadership wants.

Program Manager: From your vantage point, is the Navy moving out "full speed ahead" to support and implement the tenets of acquisition reform?

Vincent: Just before I left Washington, D.C., and went to CINCPAC Fleet, my observation was that acquisition reform was in kind of an embryonic stage and it was being accepted in pockets of the Navy. There were lots of you-need-to-show-me attitudes, so the trust factor still needed to be developed, such that if you applied your judgment and used acquisition reform you weren't going to get your hand slapped.

I think that we are beyond that. And what I'm seeing now and what I saw, from the Pacific Fleet side, is an acquisition process beginning to be more user friendly and customer friendly; that people in the acquisition or contracting business are prone to be more customer-oriented. There is much more open communication between the requirements generator and the person who is going to actually fill that requirement.

The process has improved, and it's going to get even better because acquisition reform is ongoing at various levels.

Whether it's micro purchases, small purchases, large procurements, or system acquisitions, the bottom line is that acquisition reform has indeed taken hold in the Navy. We've come a long way. Certainly, we've got a lot further to go.

Program Manager: *Of all the acquisition reform initiatives promulgated by OSD, which ones would you say are going to give us "more bang for the buck?"*

Vincent: I bet you would get as many different responses to that question as the number of people asked. On a very practical level, I think the IPT initiative is giving us a lot more bang for the buck. Because by its very nature — teaming — it's going to open communications, break down barriers, and hopefully, reduce or eliminate stovepipes, which will, in turn, allow us to get "more bang for the buck," both in terms of dollars and the propensity to institutionalize other acquisition reform initiatives.

Not only will IPTs allow people to communicate, but they also provide a forum to bring ideas forward, have those ideas aired without fear of being penalized, and allow those ideas to get into the decision process they deserve. This should lend itself to changing and improving the process, leading to another acquisition reform initiative — best practices.

I'm convinced best practices will come from the people who are actually implementing reforms, bringing those ideas forward, so we can make that change. So we go from IPTs to best practices.

Another initiative we will get a lot from in terms of cost effectiveness and pay-back is the single process initiative. By all indications, it should reduce up-front costs. And by that I mean if we have a contractor who is doing business with the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and perhaps some other non-DoD activity — all with very large contracts with very specific contractual, probably different quality-type requirements — which set of quality processes or quality requirements does the contractor use to satisfy the customer?



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Obviously, if the contractor has only one plant, they can't have several different production lines for all of these different contracts. That just adds costs on both sides.

So if you can have one single process that has the optimum quality control, process control, ISO 9000, or whatever standards we would all want and could agree to — then the contractor wouldn't have to price differently when bidding or proposing on contracts. Single process initiatives also allow both industry and the government to further reduce the number of people in plants and save money on both sides.

Program Manager: *With the downsizing of DoD, what do you see on the horizon for the education of our professional acquisition workforce? Is it realistic that we're going to be able to do more with less?*

Vincent: Almost everything that we've been talking about frankly, in terms of acquisition reform is designed to bring us closer to a smaller acquisition workforce. They're going to have to be even better educated and trained than ever before.

I say that because I don't see the requirements going down at all in what the Navy, the Army, or the Air Force is responsible for in terms of mission. Certainly, procurement budgets have reduced significantly, but they are projected to stabilize and even increase in the out-years.

And the acquisition workforce has also been downsized and will continue to be downsized, but yet we'll still have hundreds of thousands of requirements every year flow through the total system, whether we're talking small purchase, large purchase, or systems acquisition. We're going to have automated systems as well as educated and highly trained people in place to handle those requirements.

As for the need for training, it's a requirement that will never end. DSMC, as part of DoD's educational system, is going to have to give considerable

thought to how we're going to do business in the future in terms of delivering education and training to our acquisition workforce.

We have a very important responsibility in terms of the whole Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act and the requirement to deliver the right kinds of education, in the most efficient and cost-effective manner, and to be able to do, basically, "more with less" — that is our mandate.

What's the measurement of how well we do that? I don't know yet.

The size of the acquisition workforce is constantly discussed and debated. But when you consider the approximately 189,000 acquisition workforce members² out there, and that 40 or 50 percent of them probably fall into the need for continuing education, how are we going to do that? Clearly this has created student throughput, queuing, funding, and investment issues that will change our methods of course delivery.

But it has to happen. It's got to happen just because the world is moving that way, and the expectation is moving that way. As a result, the need for training and education is probably greater today than it ever has been.

Program Manager: *Having been geographically restricted to Hawaii, with the closest DSMC Region located in California, would you comment on the benefits of Technology-Based Education and Training, specifically Video TeleTeaching, as it affects those in geographically dispersed areas, even perhaps on a submarine?*

Vincent: When you're outside the continental United States, you realize the value and profound impact of video teleconferencing, automation, E-mail, and other technology that makes our lives so much easier. And when you consider that you have five or six hours' difference from Hawaii to Washington; from Hawaii to Yokosuka, Sasebo, or Guam; and even 12 hours' difference from some locations way out in the Western Pacific to Washington; it's absolutely imperative that we

come up with ways of educating that segment of the acquisition workforce better, faster, and cheaper.

And we're not just talking about the time difference. There's also the issue of distance and travel cost. It's very expensive to send people from the Western Pacific, Guam, Japan, or even Honolulu — whether it's to California, or whether it's to Washington.

I can tell you from past experience when I was in an area that was remote from training facilities — whether it was at Naval Supply Center, Puget Sound, or whether it was up at the Contracts Office of SUPSHIP in Bath, Maine — wherever it was, I always wondered why I couldn't get one trainer to come there and train 15 or 20 people rather than send 15 or 20 people to one trainer.

And I don't think that's changed. Anywhere you are, when you're trying to manage an organization with a limited budget, and work still has to be accomplished while people are out getting their training and education, you have to make hard choices between needed training and getting the job done.

While in an embryonic stage, technology-based education and distance learning will enable us to train more people, faster and cheaper.

I personally don't think there's a cookie-cutter approach to technology-based education and training or distance learning. I don't think one computerized method is going to fit all the various educational needs.

With more automated education, I think the tool set of the individual educators and trainers will change. Part of that may be acquiring more technologists than we've ever had in the past, because we need to make sure that the systems are linked properly and stay that way. There wouldn't be anything worse than to have a Video TeleTeaching session stop right in the middle of a block of instruction, or to receive distorted audio or other types of interference.

I believe the LogOn Conference recently conducted by DAU at the University of Maryland was a real eye-opener to a lot of people, including myself, in terms of the systems and technology actually out there now. It will be a challenge: which ones to use, how they are used, and which ones best meet the acquisition workforce's needs.

Ultimately, we'll have courses designed that people can go through at their own pace. So if you get students who, because of their previous training, education, and experience can keep moving ahead through self-paced instruction, you in effect allow them to progress, without being hindered by others with less training, education, and experience who might slow down the whole class.

Program Manager: *As a graduate of our Executive Program Managers Course and former commander of several contracting activities, have you formed an opinion at this point, of the benefits of a DSMC acquisition education?*

Vincent: We at DSMC, as part of DAU, really do enjoy a special place in this acquisition reform movement. The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that to really change our acquisition culture — change the way that we're doing business today — we have to start some of that change at all levels of our education and training processes.

When the acquisition career field first came into being, I remember various courses — and I'm talking about primarily the contracting side — that trained our acquisition workforce to be very disciplined, to use the rules, and to follow the rules. As a result, acquisition people came away somewhat fearful that if they didn't strictly follow the rules, various reviews would take place, either internally or even externally, with fingers pointed at the fact that they didn't follow established procedures, meaning they didn't do their job correctly.

I sense there's at least some of that risk-aversion culture changing, where they're not necessarily using the rules to find out why they can't do things, but trying

to look for rules that they can use to get on with the business of providing services, material, and weapons systems to the warfighter.

I believe DSMC is trying very hard to expand people's minds while they are here at our college — to train them; to give them tools to improve their business judgment; and to teach them how to build teams and work together. Their greatest challenge may occur when they get back into their workplace. Will they be allowed to use all that they've learned so that it isn't just "business as usual" when they return?

Program Manager: Have you had the chance to talk to any Defense industry personnel about their involvement with DSMC and the importance of bringing an acquisition education to the private sector? In your opinion, are we serving a need in the private-sector community of acquisition professionals, and are we meeting their expectations?

Vincent: Everyone that I've talked to in industry has good things to say about the College and the things that we're doing. I think, as far as I'm able to determine, industry believes the College is doing a good job. And industry sends students here, so we must be doing something right.

I do want to continue getting industry involvement with the College, as students and also as speakers or panelists. Clearly, industry can add much to the DoD student's educational experience, especially in terms of how they view acquisition reform working.

Program Manager: What do you see as the biggest challenge facing the DoD acquisition workforce?

Vincent: You know, I've thought about that one and I think keeping the acquisition reform movement continuously going forward will be our biggest challenge, not letting it become a program, per se, as we've seen so many programs come and go, but really becoming a way of doing business for the whole acquisition process. It needs to be ingrained,



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not only in the changes in the rules and tools necessarily, but just in the whole acquisition culture — the way people approach this business of supporting the warfighter.

Program Manager: And what do you see as the biggest challenge facing DSMC and you as the new Commandant?

Vincent: Some of the challenges that we must face are the same ones that OSD and the Services must deal with every day — a declining defense budget, a smaller workforce, and a smaller industrial base. And to meet these challenges, we need to continue enhancing the education and training of our acquisition workforce, to hone their critical thinking processes as well as their judgmental, evaluative, and team-building skills.

First, with the pace of change occurring today in the acquisition arena, we need to look at reducing the acquisition education and training cycle time. As soon as a new acquisition policy is written, we need to quickly incorporate this initiative into our courses and get it out to our students, the ones who will be implementing it.

Next, we need to look at providing education and training throughout the career of acquisition workforce members. They need to stay current with the latest DoD policies — what they learned three or four years ago may no longer be appropriate now, especially given the thrust of acquisition reform.

Finally, our faculty must also be current — it is important for us to have the right expertise available to help the workforce help themselves.

DSMC was established to provide the best systems acquisition education and training possible to those responsible for acquiring weapons systems. The College presently enjoys a worldwide reputation in government and industry for the quality of our education products and services. Our challenge then is to continue this momentum, especially when we are transitioning to technology-based

learning so that the same quality is maintained, while simultaneously pushing our courses to reach more and more of the workforce. We can achieve this if we stretch our imaginations, increase our abilities, and use our resources more effectively and efficiently.

Program Manager: *Admiral Vincent, thank you for your time. Is there any message you would like to leave with our readers, particularly our DAU consortium schools, and all the PEOs/PMs on the front line of this acquisition reform movement?*

Vincent: I would like them to know that what I have found so far at the Defense Systems Management College is a lot of talented and dedicated individuals, both on the faculty and the staff, that really want to do the best job they can of training and educating the acquisition workforce.

What we need to know is exactly what all of the expectations are from all of our customers — students, PEOs, PMs, acquisition executives. They are part of the acquisition workforce and we want their input so that, together, we can ensure we're on course in an ever-changing environment.

When students leave DSMC, we want them to be better for having been here, and to have added value to their professional lives and career so that the people whom they go back and work with can actually see a positive difference in their job performance.

I want our readers to know that the College is here to do that mission we're charged to do — educate the acquisition workforce. And we want to do it in the best manner that we can. We need our customers as our partners in this endeavor.

E N D N O T E S

1. Navy Rear Admiral William Vincent, DSMC Commandant, July 26, 1991 — March 25, 1993.
2. Jefferson Solution Study, Review of the Department of Defense Acquisition Workforce, DASW01-97-M-1847, September 1997, prepared for OUSD (A&T) by Jefferson Solutions, Washington, D.C.

REAR ADMIRAL LEONARD VINCENT, U.S. NAVY

Commandant Defense Systems Management College

Rear Admiral Leonard “Lenn” Vincent, Supply Corps, U.S. Navy, became the 14th Commandant of the Defense Systems Management College effective Dec. 30, 1997. Prior to his assignment as Commandant, Vincent was the Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics, Fleet Supply and Ordnance, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

A native of Oklahoma, Vincent entered the Naval Reserve Program as a seaman recruit. Following his graduation from Southeastern State Teachers College in Oklahoma, he received his commission from the U.S. Navy Officer Candidate School. Vincent also earned an M.B.A. from The George Washington University. His military education includes completion of the Navy Supply Corps School and the Armed Forces Staff College.

A member of the Navy's acquisition professional community, his past assignments include Director of Contracting, Naval Inventory Control Point; Commander, Defense Contract Administration Services Region; Commander, Defense Contract Management Command (DCMC) International; and Assistant Commander for Contracts, Naval Air Systems Command. He also served as Deputy Director for Acquisition Management, Defense Logistics Agency; and Commander, DCMC.

His sea duty includes assignment to the U.S.S. *Pensacola* (LSD 38) in October 1972 as a supply officer; and in July 1982, assignment as supply officer on the submarine tender U.S.S. *Dixon* (AS 37).

His military awards and decorations include the Defense Superior Service Medal with gold star, Legion of Merit, Defense Meritorious Service Medal, Meritorious Service Medal with three gold stars, Navy Commendation Medal, and Navy Achievement Medal.

Vincent and his wife, Shirley, have three children: two daughters, Lori and Tiffany; and one son, Stephen.